In a large saucepan, mix the sugar, milk, and corn syrup. Bring the mixture to a boil over medium heat. Keep this boiling for another two minutes, stirring frequently.

Grandmommy always measured times like this with a song. Not a normal song, of course. Her song was about a bird that pooped while sitting on a telephone pole. There were sound effects… I remember my mother gasping in shock when Grandmommy sang it in front of me, but I always laughed hysterically. The incongruity of my sweet and rather reserved grandmother singing a song about poo got me every time.

She was standing at the stove stirring the sweet, bubbling liquid as sugary steam danced across the kitchen. I darted around the kitchen, rushing from counter to table to pantry, carefully lining the Dollar Store Christmas tins with wax paper for the candy that had firmed from earlier that morning. This was the routine of the day, an entire Saturday, from breakfast until dinner, spent catching drippy fudge on wax paper and filling the mountainous stack of tins. I had begged to get out of it. Couldn’t we just settle for Christmas cards and candy canes? Why did every poor sucker we ran into during the month of December have to go home with enough candy to effectively rot a mouthful of teeth? But no, I had neglected to help with enough chores lately, and this was my penance. All vaguely interesting aspects of my teenage life would have to wait; I was the candy assistant.

Grandmommy chose to ignore my incessant whining, sarcasm, and general brattiness. She had an assistant and the companionship of her granddaughter for the day, as unpleasant as I might be. The afternoon sunlight poured through the wide kitchen window, splashing across the white and blue tiles of the floor. The warm scents of laundry soap, coffee, and melted chocolate chased any lingering chill from the room. As she moved to the counter to chop the pecans harvested from my great-aunt’s front yard, she tuned out all but the redeeming aspects of my presence and listened to the blare of the television from the living room.

“Libby, it’s your turn to stir in the chocolate chips,” she reminded me.

Remove the boiling mixture from the heat and add the chocolate chips, stirring until completely melted. Let the mixture cool for fifteen minutes.

Sighing, I looked around for a way to entertain myself as the timer ticked away again. My eyes fell on the deck of cards on the cluttered table, almost hidden between the pans of cooling fudge and Santa-bedecked containers.

“How about a quick game of Rummy?”

Her eyes lit up. “I’ll pour us some coffee. No cheating this time!”

Groaning, I set about relocating the trays and tins. “I never cheat. You just don’t want to admit I can beat you.”

I began shuffling the cards as she sat down, two steaming cups of coffee in hand. I tried to make it look natural as I carefully folded the cards into what I hoped would be the perfect waterfall shuffle, just like she taught me. She smiled slightly and nodded as the cards fell perfectly into place with a soft whoosh. I handed her the deck to cut, and then, shoving the halves together, I dealt the hands. My inner grump retreated momentarily as I concentrated on the rules of the game, searching my hand for a run. This hand was red… very red… I struggled to maintain my poker face as I mentally organized the hearts into their proper order. I just needed one. Grandmommy smiled smugly as she laid down a group of fours. With each turn, I could feel my serene façade slip as I again didn’t draw the card I needed. I continued my silent pep talk to myself (“Of course you’ll get it! How could you not get it with a hand this good?”) until Grandmommy, her eyes dancing like the most mischievous flame that ever lured a poor moth, slapped down four jacks with a crow of laughter.

“No! My card! I needed that!” I shouted in frustration.

“Oh, is this the one you’ve been over there panicking about this whole time?” she laughed. “You should work on that poker face.”

I sputtered an unintelligible reply that wobbled somewhere between flat denial and embarrassed admission. She chuckled and gathered the cards to shuffle and deal again. “You’ll get me next time,” she soothed.

The timer went off, and we returned to our stations of wax paper and chopped nuts.

Add the chopped pecans and miniature marshmallows. Stir until the marshmallows are melted. Drop candy by the spoonful onto a large baking sheet lined with wax paper.

Her role was to drop, mine was to catch. She spooned the sticky goop onto pan after pan. Years later, I would remember the taste of the fudge as the beginning of Christmas. New friendships and relationships would know that they earned the sweet seal of approval by the delivery of a Dollar Store tin packed with soft chocolate. The memory would become distant, though, overshadowed by the memories of forgotten recipes, forgotten moments, forgotten names. Eventually, Grandmommy couldn’t play Rummy, and the steps of following a recipe that she had once known by heart confused and agitated her. The tastes of the holidays would leave my family for years as we watched Alzheimer’s gradually take over the matriarch of the family. We didn’t want to make tins of candy or German chocolate cakes or dressing with the perfect amount of sage in it while Grandmommy lived in a nursing home forgetting each visit and each face. We watched her body overwhelm her, processes gradually shutting down as she faced Alzheimers’s, cancer, heart disease, diabetes...

It’s been nearly fifteen years since I’ve tasted that candy. My mother has learned to make the dressing for Thanksgiving, and the sage is still perfect. My uncle makes the beans with ham, and my aunt has figured out that elusive German chocolate cake. The best memories of my life are those simple moments playing cards in a warm kitchen, the smells wrapping snuggly around me in a comforting embrace. As a family, we continue to grieve, but we move forward, preserving those memories. We set the holiday table with the recipes that remind us of her, ensuring that she will always be with us. This year, I’ll make candy and my daughter will help. We’ll sing songs and play games while we wait for the fudge to cool on sheets of wax paper. And I’ll know that she’ll be there with us.